

Lesbians and the Vancouver Gay Games

by Judy Davidson

Certaines tensions sont survenues dans la «communauté» lesbienne lors des Gay Games tenues à Vancouver en 1990. Cet article décrit diverses formes

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de résistance politique contre tout ce qui va à l'encontre de l'identité lesbienne normative.

Celebration '90—Gay Games III and Cultural Festival, was held in Vancouver in August of 1990. It was the third time the quadrennial event had been staged. The first two events had been held in San Francisco, California. With over 2500 volunteers and 7000 athletes, the Vancouver spectacle was the largest organized sports event of 1990. Twenty-five thousand people attended the opening ceremonies. In addition to the 27 athletic events, a cultural festival celebrating lesbian and gay identities involved over 2000 writers, dancers, musicians, sculptors, painters, and other artists (Syms 1990a).

The Games' most obvious political statement was that gay men and lesbians are proud, responsible, respectable members of society. Being lesbian or gay is not wrong, but being intolerant of these people is. This was the message the mainstream media promoted throughout its coverage of the games (Persky). However, some gay rights activists argued that the games were too mainstream and placated a heterosexual norm. I would like to argue that the Games were a political event and provided a site for

several aspects of lesbian politics to be contested.

Theoretical stance

I use hegemony as an analytical tool throughout this article. Generally the word is used to refer to the ideological and cultural control which a small ruling group exercises over the rest of society. Whitson, in a more comprehensive explanation, paraphrases Raymond Williams:

Hegemony indicates both a conflict and a drive towards a more secured dominance on the part of those in power. At the same time, hegemony directs us beyond the usual meaning of ideology, the propagation of intellectual explanations of the world; and requires us to consider the pervasive and often unarticulated ways in which orthodox meanings and values suffuse the whole process of living. (58)

Another key element for my understanding of hegemony is that change is fought for and/or resisted against. It requires human agency and therefore an understanding of positional identity. We must recognize hegemonic institutions and hegemonic ideas in our own lives and experiences. Hegemony instructs us to look at informal power structures at work in a given context and therefore, when we recognize that power, we can resist within traditionally non-political areas.

My analysis will focus on heterosexist hegemony, with the acknowledgement that notions of gender and heterosexuality are con-

structed theoretical identities. Cultural hegemony is not easily categorized into distinct entities. Culture is recorded and the interrelationships it has within itself and with its contemporary society must be considered. Williams discusses how there is a distinct sense of style and a way of being within a given cultural context. This is an idea he calls structure of feeling. This is neither a learned nor formalized phenomena. A selective tradition helps determine what is retained and what is not as time passes, but each time period has its own unique and discursive structure of feeling. The dialectics between mainstream culture, gay male culture, lesbian communities, sport, and feminism are complex. The 1990 Gay Games provides an event in which these dynamics may be discussed and analyzed.

I use excerpts from print media, primarily newspaper articles from the mainstream and alternative presses, on which to base my argument. The popular press is an important source of information because it is a reflection of and/or an agent in the relationship between culture, sport, the reader, sexuality, politics, and many other mitigating factors.

Mainstream media coverage

Organizers were surprised by the large number of mainstream media representatives that covered the celebration (Griffin 1990d). Traditionally, there has been resistance to the Games. In 1982, the founder of the Gay Games, Dr. Tom Waddell, was not allowed, by a court injunction granted to the U.S. Olympic Committee, to refer to the celebration as the "Gay Olympics" (Griffin 1990b). In Vancouver, organizers faced opposition from various sources. Fundamentalist Christian organizations protested on moral grounds to have the games banned (Griffin 1990b).

Vandals spray painted homophobic graffiti on the registration centre walls (Griffin 1990c). The British Columbia provincial government refused to grant money to the organizers of the Games, basing their decision on the obscure justification that the Gay Games were duplicating activities already funded by the provincial treasury (Griffin 1990e).

Instead of lesbian and gay rights

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activists protesting an existing event, others were resisting the lesbian and gay voice and presence symbolized by this event. Its ultimate acceptance and the resulting celebration of lesbian and gay solidarity and pride, was one of the major political impacts of the Games.

The "assimilationist" critique

One of the Games' aims was to promote an understanding of gays and lesbians "as part of the community and being respected as such" (Griffin 1990a, B4). The "assimilationist" strategy that lesbians and gay men are not particularly different from the straight dominant culture was the approach favoured by the Games' organizers. This strategy was opposed by some members of the lesbian community who critiqued the institutionalized, mainstream structure of the event. It was felt there were unexamined sexist influences operating during the organization of the Games (Syms 1990a; Tully 1990). In this way, the Games were also resisted and opposed from within.

The issues involved were varied. Many women were frustrated that women's events were not respected. For example, men were allowed to participate in social events billed for

women-only. Other objections referred to the "sanitized and asexual images of lesbians and gay men" (Syms 1990a, 10) used in the Games advertising campaign.

The advertising campaign that the Metropolitan Vancouver Athletic and Arts Association (MVAAA) decided to pursue was carefully constructed. Various posters were placed in Vancouver bus shelters and lesbian and gay publications.

They portrayed primarily white, clean cut, young, able-bodied individuals (there was only one woman of colour in one of the posters). One of the posters portrayed the men as

central to the picture, "while the women were peripheral—leaning into, but not reaching the central point of focus" (Syms 1990a, 10). In another advertisement, a man's arms were protectively wrapped around a woman, visually reinforcing not only female helplessness but physical contact only between different sexes. The word lesbian was not in any of these ads, and the word gay was obscured or appeared in very small print (Syms 1990a). These visual representations reinforced insidious and subtle stereotypes for their audiences. The lesbian and gay community was thus represented in a desexualized, mainstream manner.

The Board of Directors of the MVAAA had much of the power to define and design what image and "culture" Celebration '90 would promote and present. The Board was composed of four men and three women. All of these individuals were white and university educated. Letters to the editor in various lesbian and gay newspapers articulated resistance to the Board's structure and its organization of the Games (Syms 1990b).

The Board was criticized for how it made decisions. Although one of the female Board members argued that "lesbians were present and vocal

throughout the process" (Baxter 5), another board member commented that only one woman was in attendance when many key decisions concerning the "culture" portion of Celebration '90 were made (Douglas). But both these female Board members comment that being on the organizing committee was "often a difficult and frustrating experience" (Douglas 5).

Female board members were not the only lesbians to feel that gender issues were ignored in the planning and organizing stages. One fundraising volunteer for lesbian events, came away from the experience feeling jaded:

They touted the Games to us as a way to build a "bridge" between our two communities.... Early on, it became apparent that the men's side of the program was simply not interested in issues vital to the women's agenda. (Williams 1991, 15)

She describes her feelings of:

letting the boys steamroll us into caring about their deadlines instead of being absolutely certain that our [lesbian] community agenda and concerns were the ones that mattered. (Williams 1991, 15)

She assisted in raising 10,000 dollars from lesbians for a women-only celebration, the "Biggest Lesbian Party." This money was given to the Games organizers under the assurance that the party would be carried out as a lesbian event. This was the only exclusively women's event that Games organizers advertised. The cabaret went on with organizers making no attempt to provide alternatives for men that night or to restrict their admittance to the cabaret (Williams 1991).

The power of language

The use of language and the power to name was a critical issue for lesbi-

ans at the Games. The "Biggest Lesbian Party" was told to change its name, or lose its venue privileges, because the existing name was considered exclusionary. That event thus became "Women All Night Long." The same argument was applied to a group of lesbian artists who were not allowed to use the name "Queers in Art" for the Artisans' Bazaar (Tully), part of the cultural festival being held in conjunction with the athletic events. After receiving 75 protests (the majority from gay men) objecting to the use of the controversial word "queer," the Board forced the group to change the name (Queers in Art Committee). In response to this move, the Queers in Art Committee, comprised solely of women, issued this statement:

It needs to be noted that the four male Board members voted against the name, and of the three womyn members, one was absent, one abstained, and one wished to allow us to keep the name. (Queers in Art Committee 43)

It is significant that these two events were organized by women (Syms 1990a). Vespry comments: "Holding a lesbian and gay event without recognizing the customary separation between our communities shows grave disrespect" (12).

Although the MVAAs used the rationale of exclusivity (they considered the terms "lesbian" and "queer" as not inclusive enough for mainstream culture) to justify the name changes, there was a glaring double standard in its practices. This event was called the "Gay" Games and not the "Lesbian" and Gay Games. "The very notion that the Board of Directors could dare to use the word exclusionary against someone else is clearly ridiculous" (Syms 1990a, 11).

In taking the conservative stance that words like queer and lesbian were too transgressive and dangerous, the Board was implicitly placating a sexist heteronormativity. Consider this excerpt from a letter to the

editor in *Angles* (Vancouver's lesbian and gay newspaper) which protested Games policy:

Lesbians have understood for years, the power that comes from reclaiming words that were previously used against us. Lesbian, dyke, butch, femme, cunt. I would guess that gay men have a harder time with this concept because the English language has been more of a friend to men than it ever has been to wimmin. (Tully 4)

At the 1990 Vancouver Gay Games, the organizers did not take a discursive and constructed approach to how "lesbian" would be presented. Publicly, "lesbian" was effectively subsumed under "gay" and the transgressive or challenging notion of "queer" was made invisible. Congruent with the lesbian and gay civil rights movement, lesbians and gay men were presented as a homogeneous group, neatly reproducing the hegemonic heterosexist values privileged in North American culture. The multiple and resounding challenges to this by individuals within the lesbian community are indicative of resistance to a naturalized and essentialized version of lesbian lifestyles and politics.

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